



# Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

MIKKETZ · מִקֵּץ

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7"צז

## Disguise

• The full essay written by Rabbi Sacks is available [on our website](#)

Two years after last week's tale of Yosef in prison, he becomes the ruler of Egypt, second in command of the entire country. He predicted a famine and it has arrived, even reaching Canaan. Yaakov and his family are without food, and so he sends his ten eldest sons to Egypt to buy supplies. As they arrive, they come face to face with Yosef, but they have no idea that it is him. We read:

*"Yosef recognised his brothers as soon as he saw them, but he behaved like a stranger... Yosef recognised his brothers, but they did not recognise him."* **To understand this moment, we must set it beside three earlier scenes in Bereishit, each involving disguise and failed recognition.**

Scene one: Yitzchak tells Eisav that he will bless him. Someone enters his room. "Who are you?" he asks. "I am Eisav, your elder son," comes the reply. Yitzchak hesitates. "Come close... Are you really Eisav?" He feels the rough skins on his son's arms. Still he asks, "Are you really my son Eisav?" "I am," says the other. So Yitzchak blesses him. But it is not Eisav. It is Yaakov in disguise.

Scene two: After Yaakov flees to Lavan's house, he meets Rachel, loves her, and works seven years to marry her. At the wedding, the bride enters her tent, Yaakov follows, and only in the morning does he discover the truth: He has married Leah, disguised as Rachel.

Scene three: Yehuda's first two sons die young. Their widow, Tamar, is left childless, waiting for Yehuda to give her his third son in marriage. But he delays, leaving her unable to marry anyone else. Later, Yehuda's own wife dies. On a journey, he sees a veiled woman. He leaves her his seal, cord, and staff, and later he learns - through these items - that earlier he encountered Tamar in disguise.

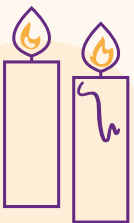
Against this background, our fourth scene - the meeting between Yosef and his brothers - becomes

clearer. The distinguished Egyptian man they bow to bears no resemblance to a young Hebrew shepherd. He speaks Egyptian. He dresses as an Egyptian ruler, wearing Paroh's signet ring and gold chain. They think they see an Egyptian prince. It is Yosef, their brother, in disguise.

**Four scenes, four disguises, four failures to see the person beneath the mask. What do they have in common?** Something very striking! In each case, disguise becomes the only way for someone to be recognised in a deeper sense - to be taken seriously or heeded. Yitzchak loves Eisav, not Yaakov. Yaakov loves Rachel, not Leah. Yehuda thinks of his youngest son, not Tamar. Yosef is hated by his brothers. Only in disguise can they briefly achieve what they seek: a blessing, a husband, a child, or non-hostile attention. Their plight is captured in one phrase: *"Yosef recognised his brothers, but they did not recognise him."*

Do these disguises succeed? In the short term, yes; but in the long term, not fully. Yaakov suffers for taking Eisav's blessing. Leah never wins Yaakov's love. Tamar has children, but Yehuda is never intimate with her again. Yosef's brothers fear him even after he forgives them. What we achieve in disguise is never the love we sought. But something else happens. Yaakov, Leah, Tamar, and Yosef discover that though they may never win the affection they long for, God is with them. A disguise hides us from others and perhaps from ourselves. But never God hears our cry and answers our unspoken prayer. In all four stories, relationships may not be healed, but identities are. They become deeply religious chronicles of growth and maturation. What they tell us is simple and profound: **those who stand before God need no disguises to achieve self-worth when standing before humankind.**

## Around the Shabbat Table



1. Why might someone feel they need to hide who they truly are to be seen?
2. Where else in Tanach do we see leaders disguising themselves? Why do you think they did it?
3. How can we hide from God, who is omnipresent and omniscient? Do you feel you are your true self when you stand before - or pray - to God?

## Takeaway Thoughts

Even when people overlook us, God never does. He sees us clearly, without costumes or masks, and teaches us that we do not need to hide, and we always matter.



# Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7" ז ת



## The Parsha in a Nutshell

When Paroh dreams of seven healthy cows consumed by seven thin ones, and of full ears of grain swallowed by withered ears, he fears they hold greater meaning, but none of his consultants can understand his dreams. Finally his cupbearer reveals that when he himself was in prison, he met a man with a talent for interpreting prophetic dreams. Yosef is then sent for. At last, his fortune is turning around.

Upon hearing Paroh's dreams, he explains that Egypt is about to have seven years of abundance, but this will be followed by seven years of famine. Not only does he share this news, but he offers some excellent advice. His suggestion is that they use the first

seven years to build storehouses and save whatever food they can, so that they are prepared when the famine hits.

Paroh is greatly impressed, and appoints him as governor of Egypt. When famine reaches Canaan, the brothers travel to buy grain for the family. Yosef knows them immediately, but they do not recognise him. This gives him the opportunity to test them. He holds Shimon and demands they return Binyamin. After a tense second meeting, Yosef hides his silver cup in Binyamin's sack, then announces it is missing, leading to the brothers' arrest. We end on this cliffhanger.



## Parsha Activity

### Voice Swap

One person (the 'Guesser') is blindfolded, and steps away while the family secretly chooses a single player to be the 'Mystery Guest.' Once the MGP (Mystery Guest Player) has been selected, the Guesser may ask them short, simple questions, and the MGP must give one- or two-word responses. When giving their answers, the MGP alters their voice however they like, whether higher and squeaky, lower and deeper, whispery or gruffer. After five questions, the Guesser tries to identify who was disguising their voice, and then a new round begins.



## Twelfth Night

Twelfth Night is a Shakespearean play from the early 1600s. It is a comedy filled with mix-ups, disguises, secrets, and surprising truths.

The story begins when a girl named Viola is left shipwrecked on a beach. Knowing that her twin brother Sebastian and the rest of the passengers and crew have drowned, she decides she must find a way to

survive on her own. But it is unsafe for a young woman to travel alone, so Viola disguises herself as a boy, calls herself Cesario, and applies to become a servant to Duke Orsino.

When Orsino meets Cesario, they hit it off right away. Cesario is able to spend a lot of time with the duke, and Viola is delighted to get to know him. They share jokes, dreams, and even debate what true love really means. These conversations are honest and open, which is ironic, because Viola can only have them while pretending to be someone else. As Cesario, she is given a freedom she never had before. But she begins to fall in love with Orsino, which is tricky when he thinks she is his servant boy. Also, Orsino is hopelessly in love with Lady Olivia,

who refuses to see him. So Orsino sends Cesario (Viola) to deliver his messages to Lady Olivia. Then things get more complicated: Viola secretly loves Orsino, Orsino unrequitedly loves Lady Olivia, and Olivia then mistakenly decides that she should marry the young man known as Cesario.

Later in the play, Viola's twin brother arrives in town, alive after all! Lady Olivia - and many others - start to mix up Viola for Sebastian, as they look so similar when Viola is dressed as a boy. Lady Olivia even weds Sebastian, believing he is Cesario. In the end, the twins finally meet, the truth is uncovered, and Orsino realises he loves Viola, not Lady Olivia. The disguises in this story investigate an interesting idea that we also see in this week's parsha: sometimes people reveal their truest selves only when they are wearing a mask.





# Cards & Conversation

**“You shall be in charge of my court, and by your command shall all my people be directed...”**

- Bereishit 41:40

When Yosef rises to power in Egypt, he doesn't just save his own people – he saves an entire nation.

**QUESTIONS:** Do you think he does this out of moral responsibility, or political strategy?

Think about the role of each person in the world. Do you think we have a responsibility to the world? If so, what is it? Then, what was Yosef's role?

*Rabbi Sacks on Bereishit 41:40 (in the Koren Sacks Humash) offers an answer:*

“God wants us not to accept but to heal, to cure, to prevent. So Jews have tended to become, out of all proportion to their numbers, lawyers fighting injustice, doctors fighting disease, teachers fighting ignorance, economists fighting poverty, and (especially in modern Israel) agricultural technologists finding new ways to grow food in environments where it has never grown before.”

*Cards & Conversation: Chumash Edition is a new resource. On one side of every parsha card, you'll find an interesting question to think about and discuss, based on the Torah portion. Flip it over, and you'll discover an idea from Rabbi Sacks that shines a new light on the parsha.*

*We are pleased to offer a weekly sample of these cards here, and you can also download the full set, request a pack of your own, and find out more by visiting [rabbisacks.org/cards-and-conversation](http://rabbisacks.org/cards-and-conversation) ☑*



## Parsha in Practice

### Value of the Week

#### Taking responsibility for one another

The story of Binyamin gives us great insights into the theme of responsibility. Yaakov fears losing him, but Yosef demands him. Yehuda steps forward and accepts full accountability for Binyamin's safety, promising to protect him no matter what. He promises to look after his youngest brother in a way that he never looked out for Yosef, many years earlier. Responsibility means stepping up, taking care of others, and recognising the needs that may be hidden beneath the surface.

### Practically Speaking

#### How to bear responsibility

We must look out for others, both at an individual level, and at a broader level, building up our schools and shuls, supporting our country, protecting our people on a national level, and protecting the world. Rabbi Sacks teaches that the balance between individual lives and the shared good is at the core of Jewish moral life.

*“Be a leader. Walk ahead. Take personal responsibility. Take moral responsibility. Take collective responsibility. Judaism is God's call to responsibility.” - Rabbi Sacks*



## Try it out

### YOUNG STUDENTS:

Think of someone who might be feeling nervous or unsure, even if they look calm. Offer to help with a task, include them in a game, share a snack with them, or ask how they are doing. When you look beyond what you see, you help others feel safe.

### ADVANCING STUDENTS:

Who in your life might need help bearing their responsibilities? Reach out with a message, offer help at home, or listen when someone needs to talk. Taking responsibility means standing beside someone, even when their needs are hidden. Noticing what is unspoken builds trust and strengthens relationships.





# Learning in Layers

Guiding you through Torah step by step, with insights from the [Koren Sacks Humash with translation and commentary by Rabbi Sacks](#). Each step takes us a little deeper and invites 'Torah as Conversation,' just as Rabbi Sacks taught.



## Examining Yosef's response to the statement from Pharaoh, "I have heard that you can interpret dreams!"

### LAYER 1: LOOK AT THE TORAH TEXT: BEREISHIT 41:16

"וַיַּעַן יוֹסֵף אֶת-פַּרְעֹה לֵאמֹר, בְּלִעְדֵּי אֱלֹהִים יַעֲנֶה אֶת-שְׁלוֹם פַּרְעֹה."

### LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

"Not I," replied Yosef to Pharaoh. "God will give Pharaoh the answer that he needs."

### LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

After years in an Egyptian prison, Yosef is now face-to-face with Pharaoh. In the past we have seen him share his dreams with his brothers as a teenager, without concern for their feelings. We have also seen him interpret the dreams of the royal baker and royal cupbearer as an adult, with more sensitivity. He now has a proven track record of accurate interpretations, and standing before the king of Egypt, it is his time to shine! How does he proceed? Does he seize the chance to tell Pharaoh how special he is? No. He answers with humility, giving all credit to Hashem. Why? And what does this show us about his personal development?

### LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

Yosef is the great dreamer of the Torah, and time and again he becomes a leader, just as he dreamed he would... But when he speaks of his successes, he attributes them to God... We and God are co-authors of the human story. For the bad we do, we take responsibility. For the good we achieve, we thank God. In this, Yosef is our mentor. Divine promise is not a substitute for human responsibility. To the contrary, it is a call to responsibility... Effort alone is not enough. We need *Siyyata diShmaya*, "the help of Heaven." We need the humility to acknowledge that we are dependent on forces not under our control. No one in Genesis invokes God more often than Yosef. He credits God for each of his successes. He recognizes that without God he could not have done what he does. And out of that humility comes patience.

### LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

When Yosef finally spoke with Pharaoh, he did something surprising. He said that the ability to interpret dreams with wisdom was not his own. Why mention this? Perhaps he was showing humility. Perhaps he was saying that insight can come from beyond ourselves. Or perhaps he is teaching something about how we hold success. Yosef manages power without letting it define him. He carries responsibility, but not pride. So we must ask: what do you think his words reveal about how we should understand our abilities?

1. How does Yosef's attitude challenge the way people usually talk about their achievements?
2. What comes more naturally to most people: taking credit or sharing it? Why?
3. Read the next few passukim. How does Pharaoh react to Yosef's statement about God? (41:39-43 in particular)

● Find out more about the [Koren Sacks Humash](#) at [rabbisacks.org/books/the-koren-sacks-humash](http://rabbisacks.org/books/the-koren-sacks-humash)

*Jonathan Sacks*  
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